

SERMON Third Sunday in Epiphany 01.26.2025 Rev Kristina Kaiser

I thought we'd begin today with an excerpt from a book called *"Theirs Is the Kingdom: Celebrating the Gospel in Urban America"* by Robert Lupton.

This is an excerpt from pages 12 and 13 where we hear this:

I once saw a large tree that had been struck by lightning many years before. The trunk was badly split and bent but the growth of recent years was sturdy and straight. Bark had grown over much of the once-exposed heartwood, leaving the trunk misshapen but well protected. How is it, I wondered, that a tree could grow to strength and maturity around such a crippling injury?

I once knew a young man...His self-concept was badly scarred from parental neglect, racism, rejecting teachers, and years of failure. His values were deformed by the survival ethic of the street and by the hurt that had become a burning core of anger. I saw new growth form a protective covering over his open wounds and broken dreams. A strong new character developed, marked with unique sensitivities and perceptions. How is it, I wondered, that a young man can grow to strength and maturity around such deforming childhood experiences?

...I have seen God take the broken, deformed things of this world, bless them with new life and sanctify them for his special purpose. From a broken tree, God provides shade in the summer. From a deeply scarred youth, [God] forms a person of unusual compassion and understanding, a model of hope to the disheartened...

I am reassured to know that the straightness of my grain is not a precondition of usefulness to God. And I am humbled to see that out of the twistedness of my wounds, [God] designs for me a special place of service.

As we hear these words today, maybe we're the ones who have **felt neglected, rejected, or ignored**. Maybe we identify as being the one who lives with a **chronic condition** or who has never been able to **catch a break**. These are the sorts of things we might consider to be **"Way Blocking."**

But are they?

Ralph Waldo Emerson is quoted as saying:

There's a crack in everything God has made.

The **Sufi poet, Rumi** says:

The wound is the place where the light enters you.

As our first Scripture reading today points out, each of us is a part of the body. We might be an **arthritic right hand**, a **shattered left knee**, or an **ulcer-laden stomach**. But even so, it is also possible for the **power of love to come in, touch our wounding**, and **empower us to be a part** of the amazing body of Christ – a body that is **capable of healing and transformation**. A body whose call is the same today as it was on one Sabbath day many years ago when Jesus entered a synagogue in Nazareth. In Luke 4:14-21, our Second Scripture Reading for today, we hear this:

Luke 4:14–21 (NRSVUE)

¹⁴ *Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region.* ¹⁵ *He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

¹⁶ *When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,* ¹⁷ *and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

¹⁸ *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

²⁰ *And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.* ²¹ *Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

RESPONSE

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

LET US PRAY:

Lord, would each person here today and worshipping with us online, experience a Way Opening. Would the words of this scripture become a healing balm to those parts of us that are hurting. And would the light shine through. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Here at FPC in Marshfield, we identify as a **Matthew 25 church** – a church who believes that *whatever we have done for another, we have also done for God.*

As such, we take it upon ourselves

- to deepen our faith through **engagement with the community**
- to **dismantle structural racism** by challenging systems that cause discrimination and oppression
- and to **eradicate systemic poverty** by working to change laws and policies that exploit those who do not have what they need

Love, compassion, and care are the mission of this church.

We desire to compassionately connect in our communities.

...whether we're baking a loaf of **bread**, serving on a **committee**, putting down **salt and sand** on icy sidewalks...

...whether we're **sitting with someone** as they cry, attending a **retirement party**, or **holding a baby** so that their caretaker can use the restroom...

...this (and so much more) is **what it means** to *be the body of Christ*, and we are **committed to that – yes?**

Luke 4, verses 14 through 21 are **cornerstone verses** for us

And so, as we read these passages today...

As some of you may well know...the passage Jesus quotes from the scroll is what we know today as Isaiah 61.

Jesus says, "I am anointed by the Holy Spirit:

- To proclaim good news to the poor
- To proclaim release to the captives
- To recover sight for the blind
- To set the oppressed free
- And to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And looking more carefully...***What does it mean to "proclaim good news to the poor?"***

Scholars tell us that, while Jesus may well have been referring to the monetary needs, that the connotation here is **not only about money**. To be "**poor**"...and specifically to be "**poor in Spirit**"...which is how it is said in **Matthew 5**...is about being **disconnected from** how much **God loves you** and **desires connection with you**.

And the Bible demonstrates this all the time – for example – the book of **Jonah**. Jonah actually says to God, "*I knew that you were loving and compassionate, slow to anger, and merciful.*"

Jonah says, "*I didn't want that for the people of Nineveh. I didn't want to be a part of spreading God's love and compassion to Nineveh.*"

It has been and will always be about **God's desire for all to be saved**, for all to **feel loved and connected**. Jesus says, "I'm here to spread *that* message." And **by extension**, as the body of Christ, **so are we**.

If we keep going, Jesus says, "***I am here to proclaim release to the captives.***"

Now, when we think of captives...or prisoners, we tend to think of **specific places** where people **lose their freedom**. They aren't allowed to go and do as they please. And there are moments when this scripture can be interpreted literally like this. However, we also find that Jesus' life and ministry were about freeing those who had become **imprisoned by religious law** – whose hearts were not grasping the **greater meaning behind the law**.

When the Pharisees say, "*Jesus, you can't heal on the Sabbath,*" Jesus says, "**The Sabbath is here for you – to restore you, to bless you.**" Later on **Paul** will tell the people in numerous letters, "*Do not be a slave to the law.*"

And so we might ask ourselves then: *In what ways are we unnecessarily imprisoned? What are the "shoulds" we're abiding by that have no real part in the love of God?*

Jesus' mission – and **by extension**, as the body of Christ – **our own mission** – is to *free the imprisoned, give sight to the those who cannot see, and to set the oppressed free.*"

Jesus then goes on to say, "*The Holy Spirit has anointed me to:*

-Proclaim the year of the Lord's favor

And for some, this becomes a pivotal moment. Some begin to wonder if this is the Messiah they had been waiting for.

But what I'd like to hone in on for a bit are these words, "***The Holy Spirit has anointed me to...***" And this is already coming up, but just to be really explicit about it:

Jesus' words indicate to us – that:

The reason for the anointing of the Holy Spirit is mission.

We don't receive the Holy Spirit in order to become wealthy or even to feel happy or peaceful. Whatever else might be true, whatever gifts we might receive...all of these things lead back to **God's desire to see all people saved**. It all leads back to this **commandment to love** – to love God, to love your neighbor, to love yourself, to love God's creation.

The mission is love, and the **Holy Spirit anoints us – equips us – counsels us – teaches us – and opens the way** for us to **move and act and have our being** in this great, big, interconnected web of love. It is really our one mission.

And if we remember back to this opening story about our woundings...
...How easy it can be to think to ourselves:

- I can't do it.
- Please, Lord. Not me, not now. Not like this.

And this, too, belongs, just to say. Sometimes, what we **need** is the **Sabbath portion** of this passage. We need to be **filled with the love of God ourselves**, we need that love of God **to act as a balm** to the parts of us that are wounded. "Loving ourselves" truly is a part of what it looks like to love our neighbors.

And so, I'd love to close us today with 3 things we can do in order to help us stay connected with this mission:

1. Invite the Holy Spirit daily.

When Jesus reads from the scroll, it all begins with, "*The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me.*" When Jesus speaks to the disciples he says, "*It is important that I go so that I can send you the Holy Spirit.*"

And so, this can be a very simple breath prayer that you pray as often as you'd like:

Inhale: *Come*

Exhale: *Holy Spirit*

It could be a prayer you offer up as you watch the sunrise, drink your coffee, or eat your breakfast: *Come, Holy Spirit.*

The Holy Spirit is the wind beneath our wings, and so really what we are doing is **opening our awareness and setting our intentions**. Secondly, we can:

2. Pray for freedom – for ourselves and for others.

Oftentimes, the struggle is to even be able **to know** that we're **operating under** some sort of **oppressive law** – some sort of a “*should*” that doesn't have to be. When the Pharisees challenge Jesus not to heal on the Sabbath, he answers by saying: *If this man could be healed today, why would I leave him sick? Would it be loving to walk by and do nothing or would it be loving to call on God to heal him?*”

For many of us, the struggle is to even **recognize where our blind spots are**, which is where our third help can come in:

3. Take a Sabbath.

Each of us needs **quality time** to spend in the **presence of the Divine**. If we don't have that, we're going to feel worn out and disconnected from the love we are called to.

Whether we are the one with a painful childhood, the rebellious worker, or in some other way, the scarred tree, the call of God is ours – both to receive love and to give it.

To quote Robert Lupton again, *“the straightness of my grain is not a precondition of usefulness to God. And I am humbled to see that out of the twistedness of my wounds, he designs for me a special place of service.”*